CLAIMS:

1. A device for automatically flushing hydrants, the device being installed externally of an existing hydrant, the device comprising a nipple adapted for attaching the device to a hydrant; a valve for controlling flow from the hydrant through the valve; a control for automatically operating the valve; and a lockable box containing at least the valve, the box having an outlet for allowing water from the hydrant to pass from the valve to the exterior of the box.

2. The device of claim 1 wherein an internally threaded collar is rotatably mounted to the nipple externally of the box.

3. The device of claim 1 wherein the control is mounted internally of the box.

4. The device of claim 3 wherein the control is programmable by a user.

5. The device of claim 4 wherein the control includes manually operable devices for setting at least one of time of operation and duration of operation.

6. The device of claim 4 wherein the valve is bistable and the control is battery operated.

7. The device of claim 1 wherein the box includes a perforate lower wall through which water may escape.

8. The device of claim 1 wherein a hose or pipe extends through a wall of the box to expel water.

9. The device of claim 8 wherein the hose or pipe is physically connected to an outlet of the valve.

10. The device of claim 1 further comprising a perforate diffuser which diffuses water after it passes through the valve.

11. The device of claim 1 wherein the box includes a carrying handle.

12. The device of claim 11 wherein the box includes an upper wall, the handle being secured to the upper wall.

13. A method of automatically flushing a portion of a water distribution system, the system including a hydrant, the hydrant having a below-ground inlet connected to the water distribution system, an above-ground threaded outlet, and a manually operable valve between the inlet and the outlet, the method comprising installing a device to the threaded outlet of the hydrant, the device comprising an electrically operable valve and a control for periodically operating the electrically operable valve; opening the manually operable valve to allow water to flow through the hydrant into the device, and thereafter allowing the control to open the electrically operable valve periodically to cause water to flow from the water distribution system through the hydrant, and through the electrically operable valve to flush a portion of the water distribution system.

14. The method of claim 13 wherein the control is mounted internally of a box, the method including programming the control to select at least one of time and duration of opening the valve in the box.

15. The method of claim 14 wherein the outlet of the hydrant is externally threaded, and wherein attaching the device to the hydrant comprises threading an internally threaded collar onto the outlet of the hydrant, the internally threaded collar being rotatably mounted to the box.

16. The method of claim 15 wherein the collar is mounted to a nipple, externally of the box.

17. The method of claim 14 wherein the box includes a perforate lower wall, the perforate wall diffusing water expelled through it

18. The method of claim 14 wherein the hydrant supports the box and holds it above the ground.

19. The method of claim 18 wherein a hose or pipe is provided, the hose or pipe carrying water from the valve to the exterior of the box.

20. The method of claim 11 wherein the hydrant is a fire hydrant.

21. The method of claim 11 wherein the hydrant is a flushing hydrant.